

## TEF Special Edition

**Students as consumers? There is a potential alternative...**

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**Abstract**

This paper offers a reconsideration of the student as consumer. Through playfully finding similarity between a university and a gym, students are recognised as creators, or co-creators, of their educational journey and therefore *producers*, rather than *consumers*.

**Keywords:** Consumerism, student experience, learning, co-creation

The well-worn creation of students as consumers and the debates and tensions within this problematic positioning are, given the wider landscape, perhaps more relevant than ever before.<sup>1</sup> The shiny TEF badges provide us with a honed, contemporary resonance of elements within the 1997 Dearing report, in which the UK government identified students as ‘customers’. Similarly, the increased marketisation of UKHE, the commercially-centric stance of the CMA, which encourages a consumerist attitude in applicants and students, and the increase in tuition fees (themselves linked to institutional TEF ratings in the future) all serve to position the student as an increasingly value-driven customer.

However, the rise of the student-as-customer does not wholly emanate from the mechanisms of the HE sector and its governance. There is a wider picture to be drawn upon...

At root, the problem perhaps lies in the word ‘consumer’ or ‘customer’. For a moment, let us imagine the person who, in popular terms, might embody both of these words. Have a picture? We are drawn irrevocably to the idea of the shopper. Retail culture is intrinsic to the notion of customer. I would venture that this is also what our students imagine, embedded as they are in the popular culture of commercial consumption. And therein lies the crux of the issue. By and large, popular culture positions the consumer/ customer as a transactionalist; I go to Sainsbury’s

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the nuanced complexity can be seen in; Kandiko, C. B. & Mawer, M. (2013). Student Expectations and Perceptions of Higher Education. London: King’s Learning Institute, or in Bunce, L, Baird, A and Jones S.E. (2016) ‘The Student-As-Consumer Approach In Higher Education And Its Effects On Academic Performance’ Studies in Higher Education [online].

(other brands are available), I buy my goods and I leave. I do not invest in Sainsbury's; I do not feel a sense of belonging or shared endeavour. It is a transactional engagement, however much the branding might suggest otherwise.

This is the cultural backdrop against which I think our students understand their position as consumer. Moreover, I think the genie is out of the lamp and will not be returned. As a passionate educationalist, I see this position at its most stark as devastating. It reduces the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities to a shallow transaction: I pay for my degree and I leave. This commoditisation of knowledge destroys the potential for university education to be a genuinely humbling and transformative personal experience from which one emerges with horizons stretched; a sometimes messy, stumbling exploration for the student, in which becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable is crucial for developing a valuable personal resilience. Enough idealism; the genie is ready to wreak reductive havoc if we let it do so.

This is where the notion of the gym might enter; if one repositions the student-customer, not as a transactionalist, but as an engaged co-owner of the personally developmental experience, such as is found in the active gym member, one is able to re-imagine the student as consumer.

In the university-as-gym, it is the institutional job to provide good running machines, good classes, and a wider facilitative environment in which the staff can intelligently steer members towards co-defined fitness goals.

However, the burden of success does not lie solely with the gym and its staff, but also with its members. It is, emphatically, *not* the responsibility of the staff to exercise for their members; if, after missed training sessions and non-engagement with the self-directed diet and exercise plan, members were to complain that, despite being paying customers, they were neither thin nor fit, I should have to remind them of their side of the bargain.

This is a difficult but essential conversation. I find the gym analogy allows a way into territory wherein those students drawn to sitting in a consumer mindset can reimagine the customer role and recognise that, in the context of a successful university journey, they are not actually popular consumers at all, but rather consumer-producers. They do not really *consume* the facilities or the expertise at their disposal, but they do *produce* outcomes. More than this, at their

most successful, students are co-producers, working in partnership with the university towards co-creation of a better future self; jointly and equally responsible for the outcome.<sup>2</sup>

This is a continuous, iterative journey. Given the particular nature of the external landscape, it also presents a troublesome position to occupy successfully. However, I believe that meaningful co-creation is necessary to help our students move beyond being a consumer of knowledge-as-commodity, to being co-producers of knowledge as a lived experience that delivers deep, transformative growth.

## Reference list

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<sup>2</sup> Last year, I was fortunate enough to meet Professor Tom Inns, Director of the Glasgow School of Art. He indicated that students there had rejected their role as consumers in favour of self-recognition as producers.